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Mengistu and the politics of starvation

Even as the Reagan administration increases to more than \$1 billion its current commitment to relief of the African famine and calls on others to match this grant, the Marxist regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam in Ethiopia emerges as mainly responsible for the worst consequences of the prolonged drought.

By deliberately suppressing a United Nations report in 1982 that warned of approaching disaster if reserve grain stocks were not built, the military junta of Col. Mengistu ensured the death of thousands who could have been saved by timely warning and prompt action.

More reprehensible still was the refusal of Col. Mengistu in the spring and summer of 1984 to pay any attention to the warnings of his own Relief and Rehabilitation Commission.

Driven by his overriding determi-

nation to stage for his Soviet allies a massive celebration last September of the 10th anniversary of the Ethiopian revolution, Col. Mengistu wasted more than \$100 million on huge monuments, buildings, and

decorations while famine already stalked his impoverished land.

In a seven-hour address to the founding congress of the Workers Party of Ethiopia, Col. Mengistu, as the new secretary-general, won the

smiling approbation of visiting Soviet Politburo member Grigory Romanov by a speech replete with Marxist slogans. The only indirect reference to the hunger spreading in the northern provinces was a brief mention of the famine 10 years ago and the assurance that scientific materialism would solve the problem.

The sins of omission and commission of the Mengistu regime in handling the drought go back in time

and have deepened its impact not only in Ethiopia but in the Sudan. The initial enthusiasm of Ethiopian peasants for the land reform made possible by the revolution has faded as 90 percent of agricultural investment has been diverted to ineffective state farms that produce only 6 percent of the grain.

In the lush southern provinces, whose food surplus might have been expected to cushion the impact of drought in the north, food conservation was condemned as hoarding,

and government-controlled prices left the peasant farmer with no incentive to produce. As a result, the country possessed few reserves when the full extent of the disaster had to be admitted.

Unwilling to meet halfway the demands of ethnic minorities for local autonomy in the northern provinces, Col. Mengistu has built up an army of 250,000 equipped with \$2 billion worth of Soviet weapons. To weaken the support in the countryside for continuing guerrilla resistance, he has used the danger of starvation to justify the forcible relocation of thousands of peasant farmers from north to south. But this compulsory migration has not been accompanied by any prior planning for new homes, and thousands are straggling back to their abandoned villages.

Even more tragic is the plight of those peasants in the provinces of Tigre and Eritrea who have sought food and asylum in neighboring Sudan. They have been attacked by Ethiopian planes on their escape route and have found the Sudanese refugee camps full and food scarce.

The Reagan administration was initially slow in reacting to the complex demands of this tragic drama but now, quite rightly, has placed first priority on the emergency need for feeding the starving, and Agency for International Development officials recognize that more funding may be necessary.

However, in the long run no American administration can indefinitely continue supporting an Ethiopian regime so grossly incompetent that it cannot feed its

own people, so ideologically committed that it provides the Soviets with strategic air and naval bases and so irresponsible as to plot with Col. Qaddafi of Libya the overthrow of the governments of Sudan and Somalia.

Already the State Department is under pressure from Ethiopian exile leaders to make it clear that continuing long-term support must depend on some change in the regime itself or in its policies.

The word needs to be passed quietly in Addis Ababa that an Ethiopian government that puts some distance between itself and the Soviets and is willing to adopt more rational agricultural policies has a better chance of getting the help it needs from the United States.

Recent visitors to the Ethiopian capital report that army officers are increasingly outspoken in their criticism of Col. Mengistu, and no one seems to take seriously his attempt to blame the famine on a lack of Western response.

With only 1,700 Soviet advisers and 4,000 Cuban troops in the country, a disaffected officer corps could turn against the unproductive alliance with the Soviets, especially if the Reagan administration makes it clear that the United States would respect the territorial integrity of Ethiopia and provide economic and military assistance.

Until this kind of basic change takes place, the United States has an obligation to demand an increased official presence in Addis Ababa and the right to travel throughout the country, to ensure the honest and impartial distribution of our aid.

Cord Meyer is a nationally syndicated columnist.